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Libel trial resurrects conspiracy theory

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Mark Lane, celebrity lawyer and conspiracy enthusiast, will ask a Miami federal jury Monday to decide that E. Howard Hunt, formerly of Watergate and CIA fame, was personally involved in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas 21 years ago.

Pure twaddle, retort Hunt and his lawyers.

The trial, to be heard this week by U.S. District Judge James Kehoe, is a replay of Hunt's 1980 lawsuit against the Washington-based Liberty Lobby, an ultraright pressure group that publishes a weekly tabloid called The Spotlight.

In 1978, The Spotlight — which bills itself as "The Paper You Can Trust" — published an article by former CIA agent Victor Marchetti, which among other claims cited a 1966 CIA memo that purportedly said Hunt was in Dallas that day and suggested he had a role in Kennedy's murder.

Hunt, who spent 33 months in prison for the Watergate burglary, sued the Liberty Lobby for libel.

At the 1981 trial, Liberty Lobby attorneys conceded that Hunt could present witnesses to prove he was in Washington the day Kennedy died. They couldn't produce the memo. And they defended Marchetti's article as just a warning to Hunt that the CIA was trying to make him a scapegoat.

The jury didn't buy it and awarded Hunt \$650,000. But on appeal, a retrial was ordered because of a flawed jury instruction.

This time, Liberty Lobby has hired Lane, author of the 1966 best seller *Rush to Judgment*, which lambasted the Warren Commission investigation of Kennedy's murder. Lane's enthusiasm for charging the government with a variety of unsavory plots

long since has made him a folk hero among conspiracy hobbyists.

In the late 1970s, Lane defended James Earl Ray, the convicted killer of Martin Luther King Jr., on the theory that King was killed by the FBI. His allegations were unproven.

From there, Lane went on in 1978 to represent Jim Jones and the People's Temple. After the Guyana tragedy, Lane accused a variety of government agencies of conspiring to drive Jones and his followers to commit mass suicide. Again, the allegations were unproven.

Lane's latest forum is the Liberty Lobby trial. And his defense, he says, will be to prove the truth of Marchetti's story.

"This case will be tried very differently this time," Lane promises. "Last time, the defense was apologizing for the article. That's not my style."

It certainly isn't, agree Hunt's Baltimore-based lawyers, William Snyder and Kevin Dunne.

Last year, when Liberty Lobby told Kehoe that it wanted Lane to defend it, Snyder and Dunne protested on the argument that Lane would turn the trial into a "Roman circus" of conspiracy theories. They attached a sheaf of newspaper and magazine clippings criticizing Lane for making spectacular, scattershot accusations that can't be proved. One 1979 Esquire piece said Lane has only two motives: profit and headlines.

Even so, Kehoe finally agreed that Liberty Lobby could hire whomever it liked to defend it. And Lane, who underwent a quintuple heart bypass operation last summer shortly before the trial first was scheduled to begin, now is ready to defend in full Mark Lane fervor.

"The Kennedy assassination is an unfinished piece of American history, and we may have a conclusion in this case," he says. "We intend to present evidence regarding the role of the CIA relative to the assassination of Kennedy."

Lane's star testimony, he indicates, will come from Marita Lorenz, a one-time mistress of Fidel Castro who later was sent by the CIA back to Cuba to assassinate him. That plot supposedly failed because her poison capsules accidentally dissolved in the cold cream jar in which they were hidden.

According to Lane, Lorenz says she drove from Miami to Dallas the day before Kennedy's death in a two-car caravan with Lee Harvey Oswald and several anti-Castro Cubans, including Frank Sturgis, who also would later become a Watergate burglar. In Dallas, Lorenz supposedly met Hunt that day.

Dunne says that Lorenz's story simply is incredible.

"For instance, she claims she first met Oswald in 1961 in Florida before the Bay of Pigs invasion," Dunne says. "Well, all the evidence shows that Oswald was in Russia from 1959 to 1962."

Such contradictions, and the two-decade history of investigations that have discounted any CIA involvement in Kennedy's death, don't make Lane waver.

"We'll get right in the heart of the Kennedy assassination," he says with evident relish.

As for Dunne and Snyder, they just plan to prove that Marchetti's memo is mythical and that E. Howard Hunt was 1,200 miles away from Dallas the day Kennedy died.

"We'll let the jury decide," Dunne says.